

The Vikings in History

Third Edition

F. Donald Logan

The Vikings in History

'A good vigorous account of the great Scandinavian explosion . . .'

Times Education Supplement

'[This] wide-ranging account offers the best general synthesis of current knowledge about these fascinating adventurers.'

Choice

Completely updated to include important primary research, archaeological findings and debates from the last decade, this third edition of F. Donald Logan's successful book examines the Vikings and their critical role in history.

Focusing on the period from 800–1050, the author uses archaeological, literary and historical evidence to analyse the Vikings' overseas expeditions and their transformation from violent raiders to peaceful settlers. On a broad canvas from Vinland to the Volga, Logan paints the picture of the exuberant, skilled, land-hungry warrior-seamen who sailed out of the fjords and islands of Scandinavia and left an indelible mark on history.

This new edition includes:

- a new preface explaining the aims of the book
- updated further reading sections
- an extended epilogue
- maps and photographs.

By taking this new archaeological and primary research into account, the author provides a vital text for historians and all readers interested in these fascinating people.

F. Donald Logan is Professor Emeritus of History at Emmanuel College, Boston. He is the author of *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (Routledge 2002) and *Runaway Religious in Medieval England, c.1240–1540* (1996).

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Third edition

F. Donald Logan

First published 1983
by Routledge

Second Edition 1991
Reprinted 1992, 1995, 1998
Third Edition 2005
by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the UK by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016

Transferred to Digital Printing 2007

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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Typeset in Goudy by
Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Logan, F. Donald.

Vikings in history / F. Donald Logan.— 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Vikings. 2. Civilization, Viking. 3. Northmen.

4. Middle Ages—History. 5. North America—Discovery and exploration—Norse. I. Title.

DL65 . L63 2005

940' . 04395—dc22

2005005666

ISBN 0-415-32755-5 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-32756-3 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-13652-709-8 (ebk)

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Acknowledgements

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Preface to the first edition

A word of explanation to the reader for the intrusion by an historian of the late middle ages into the holy places of early medieval history.

Few epochs are of more genuine interest to the historian than the epoch of Viking-age Europe. Into the consciousness of Western Europe came hordes of Northmen, spilling out of the lands of Scandinavia, lands hitherto vaguely known and little considered. It is a period which invites the professional historian with other research interests to investigate its general lines of development, to search out results of recent specialized scholarship and to identify the historical problems being addressed and still to be solved. It is a story worth telling, and the story told here is focused on the Viking expeditions, the Vikings on their way across seas, through river systems, and even overland; the Vikings abroad. The contact of the Vikings with the outside world during the period roughly 800 to 1050 has given a European – perhaps, some might say, even a world – dimension to their story and has given rise to the Viking age. Such a period, it is fervently hoped, can profit from a fresh look by an outsider.

Steering this outsider from perilous shoals and hidden reefs are good friends and faithful guides. Chief among these is Dr Janet Nelson, who read the text throughout and provided me with the benefit of her broad knowledge of the period, her acute historical judgement and the encouragement needed to persevere. It is a debt only partially repaid by a much improved text. Professor Henry R. Loyn has read the manuscript twice for the publisher, and his perceptive comments and enthusiasm for the project are greatly appreciated. Parts of the text were generously read by Dr Marlyn Lewis, Mr A. F. O'Brien, and Dr David Smith.

Information concerning the Goddard coin was supplied by Dr Bruce J. Bourque of the Maine State Museum in Augusta, Maine. Numerous inquiries to the staff at the Emmanuel College Library were greeted promptly and cheerfully with accurate information, particularly by Cynthia J. Whealler and Judith K. Narosny. Infelicities of style persist despite the

advice of Cynthia Jobin. Professor J. J. Scarisbrick, who originally suggested that I write this book, has shown enthusiasm for the project at every stage, and the publisher, Claire L'Enfant, has assisted me throughout with kindly forbearance and high professional expertise. The onus of proofreading and indexing has been eased by the kind assistance of Dorothy Walsh Fleming, a former student, and Pamela Johnson, a present student of this college.

The errors that remain – *errata et corrigenda residua* – are due to personal limitations of knowledge and (alas!) defects of character.

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Boston, Massachusetts

Preface to the second edition

The author welcomes the opportunity of this new edition to thank fellow historians and others for corrections and suggestions made, both in personal communications and in reviews, when the first edition of this book appeared. In this new edition I have incorporated these changes as well as those required by the advance of scholarship. In the English language alone the bibliography grows at an amazing pace; in the suggestions for further reading an attempt has been made to indicate important new titles.

F.D.L.

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Preface to the third edition

When this book was first published in 1983, the subject of the Vikings was one of many in medieval history of middling general interest. Popular stereotypes of ferocious warriors with horned helmets, slashing and burning, raiding and raping, were not uncommon. A Hollywood film on the subject was generally seen as a comedy. The serious scholarship, which dates from the nineteenth century, had only a small but respected place in the greater world of medieval studies.

In recent years the torrent of literature at every level has produced a new Viking Age. In the year 2000 celebrations in North America marked the millennial anniversary of the Viking landing at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland: symposia were held; a travelling exhibition of Viking artefacts was organized by the Smithsonian Institution; books – generally collaborative undertakings – were published. Also, specialized conferences on the Vikings have recently been held in almost every part of what we might call the Viking World on every possible aspect of the subject, and publication of their papers have inevitably followed, to our great profit.

Archaeological excavations from the New World to Old Russia and at hundreds of sites in between, executed with the refined methods of modern research, have not only unearthed objects of great interest but have also provided a deeper and clearer view of the historic Viking Age. And, as this edition is going to press, an early settlement has been found near Waterford and a grave site in Cumbria. Place-name and linguistic scholars continue to provide new insights into the Viking period and people. Historians stand in the debt of scholars in these disciplines and know that, given the paucity of literary sources, it will be from them that our knowledge of the Vikings will continue to grow. This new edition endeavours to take advantage of this extraordinary flowering of Viking scholarship.

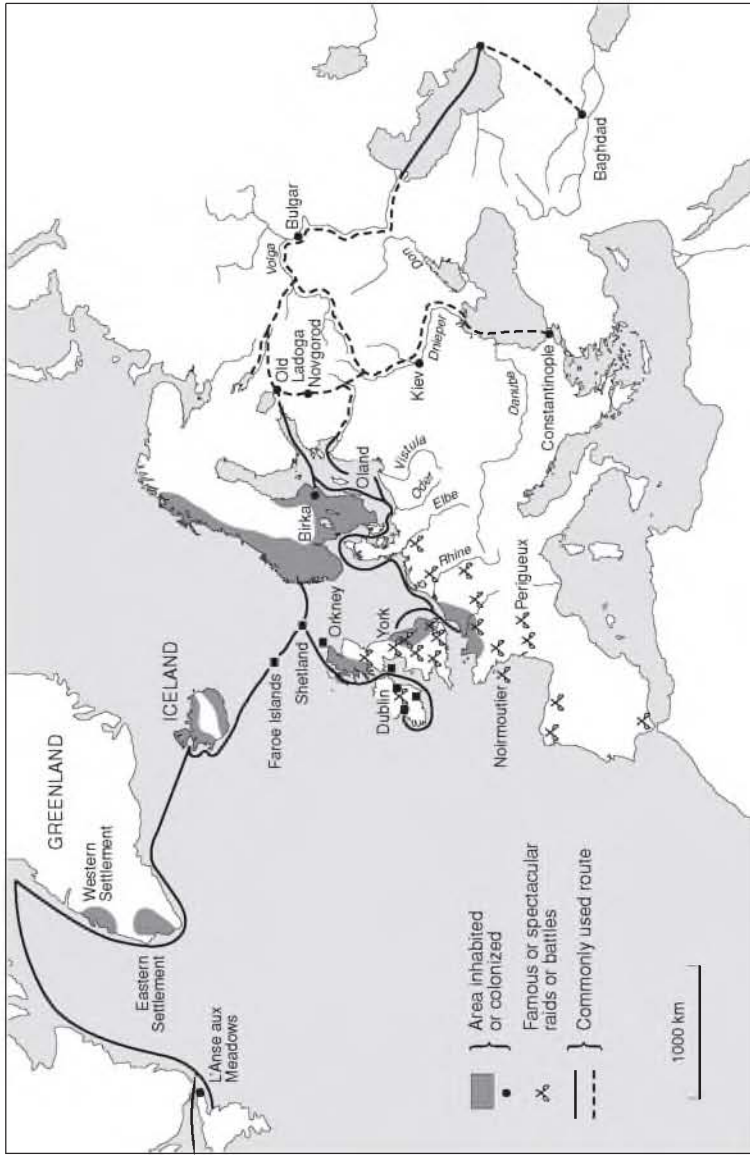
The emphasis here, as in previous editions, is on the Viking expeditions – the Vikings abroad. The term 'Viking' etymologically seems to mean 'the inlet folk', but in contemporary sources, when it was used, it referred to

those Scandinavians who left their native lands, who went *a-viking*. In its earliest usage it meant the raiding Vikings; 'pirates', 'marauders' and 'robbers' were appropriate synonyms. Yet, in the course of time, it began to lose something of its pejorative sense, and 'pirate' and 'Viking' became quasi-respectful usages as, for example, when the duke of Normandy in the early tenth century was known as the *comes piratarum* (literally the 'count of pirates' or 'count of Vikings') without any intended disrespect. To be sure, modern historians by accepted convention tend to use the word 'Viking' – occasionally with a lower case – to refer to all Scandinavians who lived during the Viking Age, which is generally dated c.800 to c.1050 (1066 in England). This modern construct cannot be argued with, but it should be said that the peoples living in the homelands did not consider themselves 'Vikings'. Their self-identifications were regional or, at most, 'national': Danes and Norse and Swedes perhaps, but not Vikings. It is the Scandinavians who left the islands and fjords of their northern peninsulas and travelled west to the British Isles, Iceland, Greenland and North America, south to France and the Low Countries and east deep into Russia who are the subject of this book.

A work such as this depends on the scholarship of others, hundreds and hundreds of others, past and present. Only to a small extent is that debt indicated in the suggested readings appended to each chapter. It is an extremely rich harvest one is privileged to reap.

F.D.L.
8 February 2005
Brookline, Massachusetts

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Map 1 The Viking expeditions.

1 The Vikings on the eve

A furore normannorum, libera nos, domine. (From the violence of the men from the north, deliver us, O Lord.)

This might well be taken as the epitaph chiselled by general historical opinion on the Viking gravestone. The phrase – there is no evidence that it ever became part of the monastic litanies – sums up the hostile treatment frequently given to the Vikings by historians of the early Middle Ages: the wild Vikings proved a temporary threat to the progress of western civilization. They belong, it is said, on the periphery of events, far removed from the central events of the ninth, tenth and early eleventh centuries. They were, like the Magyars and the Moors, irritants, negative and destructive, hostile to Francia, the historical centre of Europe at that time. The traditional story begins or, at least, rises to a high pinnacle with the coronation of Charlemagne at St Peter's in Rome on Christmas Day in the year 800. We are told variously that this event was the central point of the early Middle Ages, that it was the first attempt by the Germanic peoples to organize Europe, that it was the event which provides a focus for European history till the eleventh century and beyond. Political theorists have taken this event, however they may interpret it, as a landmark in the struggle between 'church and state'. And, we are told, the main lines of European history follow. Charlemagne established an empire or, at least, a large area of western Europe under Frankish control: from the Danish March to central Italy. This so-called empire collapsed under his son and his grandsons. With the treaty of Verdun in 843 there began the dismemberment of this empire, and within a hundred years the once united empire of Charlemagne had been fractured and left in hundreds of pieces, some tiny, others large, all virtually separate and autonomous units. Then, the traditional story continues, the East Franks in Saxony slowly began to rebuild and Otto I took the imperial title in 962. His successors developed a strong

2 *The Vikings on the eve*

East Frankish state; in 1049 this development reached its climax when Henry III placed on the papal throne Leo IX, who started the work of papal reform. The promise of Charlemagne was now fulfilled. Thus, in this accounting, the story of European history from the beginning of the ninth century till the mid-eleventh century is the story of the rise and fall of the Carolingian empire and the rise of its German successors. Who can doubt this?

Doubt, however, should arise, for this traditional view has as its focus Francia; the rest of Europe, while not forgotten, is thrown out of focus and placed on the margin of events, peripheral to what was happening in the lands of Charlemagne and his successors. The nationalist historians of the nineteenth century, particularly the French and Germans, in search of their national origins have set the historiographical agenda for the twentieth century and, one fears, the twenty-first century: thus, this Charlemagne-Otto I-Henry III school of historical writing. The Viking invaders, to them, were merely a negative, destructive force which accelerated the decline of civilization in the west. Relying overmuch on the monastic chronicles, the nationalist historians seem to have forgotten the other destructive forces at play in the Europe of the time. What of the internecine wars among the Irish tribes or the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms or the Frankish peoples? The Vikings have become a convenient whipping boy.

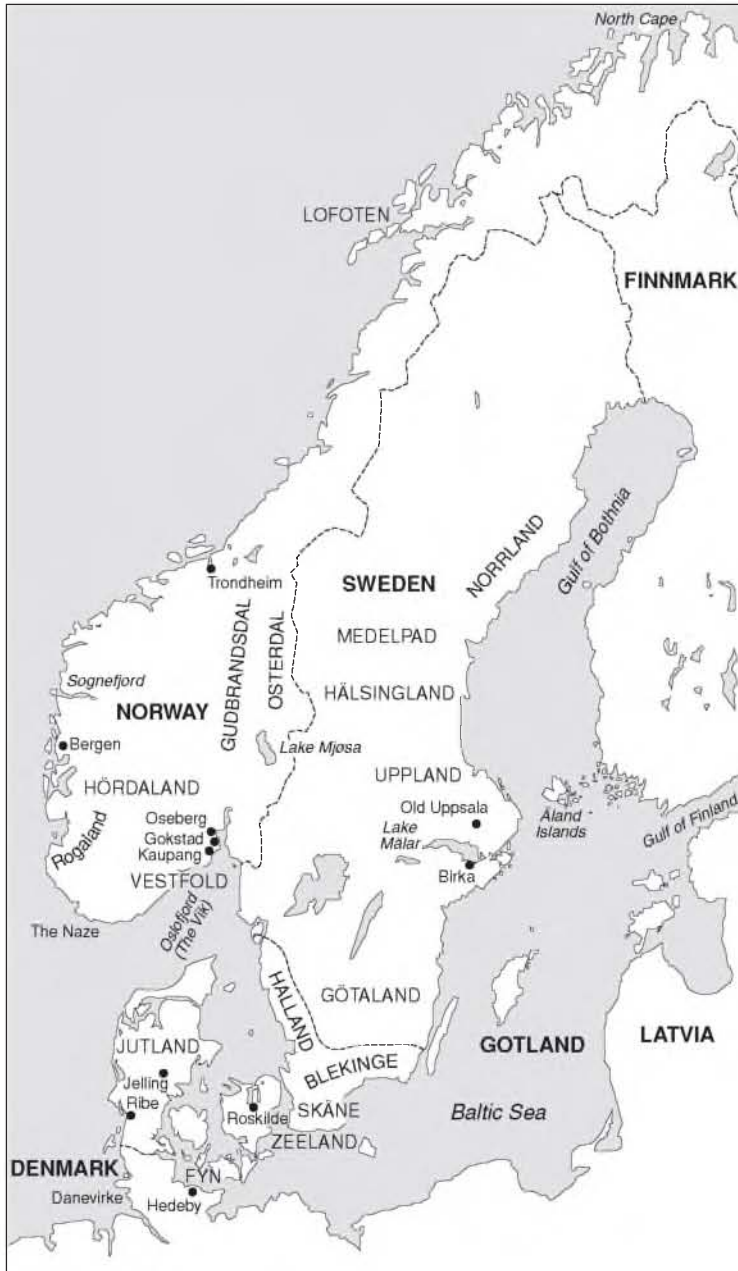
This book argues that the traditional focus is misplaced: if there is to be a single focus, it should not be centred on the Carolingians and their successors but, rather, on the Scandinavian peoples of northern Europe and on the peninsulas of the north where the dynamic forces of Europe were to be found. The Viking civilization of the north, vibrant, untamed and raw, had a strong and unmistakable impact on much of the rest of Europe and on lands across seas and oceans. While Charlemagne was receiving the imperial crown in the year 800, the Vikings were harassing the coasts of England, Scotland and Ireland and setting up bases in the Orkneys and the Western Isles. Before the death of Charlemagne in 814, they had interdicted the northward progress of the Franks. To the court of his son, Louis the Pious, there came with an embassy from Constantinople in 838 Vikings who had undoubtedly reached Byzantium through Russia. While the grandsons of Charles were carving out their petty kingdoms, destined to be carved into smaller and smaller pieces, the countryside of Francia was almost constantly raided by these people from the north. Within a hundred years of the death of Charlemagne the Vikings had set up kingdoms in Ireland, in the north and east of England and in Russia as well as an overseas settlement in Iceland. These warrior-seamen of Scandinavia were to travel as far west as the shores of North America and as far east as the Volga basin and some even beyond.

An uncritical obsession with a European history with Francia and, later, the empire and the papacy at its centre has caused the historian to think of the Viking only in passing. This franco-centric view has, strangely enough, caused attention to be placed on the decline of a prematurely organized state with its tedious list of soubriqueted kings. The dynamic and vital forces in Europe are not to be found in a decaying civilization but rather in the exuberant, at times destructive warrior-seamen who sailed from the northern European peninsulas and whose legacy can be traced in lines through Normandy, Sicily, the Crusades and an Anglo-Norman state whose laws have come to form the basis of legal systems in North America and elsewhere. Let us look to the north.

Scandinavia

It was from the northern European peninsulas that the Vikings came: from the Jutland peninsula and its easterly islands and from the Norwegian-Swedish peninsula and the Baltic islands offshore. The three lands from which they came – which we would now call Norway, Sweden and Denmark – cover vast areas. If one leaves the northern tip of Scandinavia at Cape North and travels to Rome, one is only half-way when southern Denmark is reached. Yet, in a sense, this is misleading, for this land was not thickly settled in the Viking period: we are dealing with a very large area with a scattered population, and beyond the Nordic peoples were others such as the Lapps. These three places face the sea in different ways: the face of Denmark to the west and southwest; the face of Norway to the west and, so to speak, to the far west; and the face of Sweden to the east and southeast. If we are to look for a key to the geography of these places, it is in the mountains and fjords of Norway, the dense forestland of Sweden and the size of Denmark.

Norway, a vast land, then as now mostly uninhabitable, extends over 1,600 miles along its coast and 1,100 direct miles from its southern tip, The Naze, to Cape North, well above the Arctic Circle. The same northwestern European highlands which can be seen in Donegal and across Scotland stretch through almost the full length of this land, which looks like the upturned keel of a ship (thus, the name of these mountains, The Keel), and leave Norway with an average altitude of 500 metres above sea-level. Its western shore is punctuated by fjords; some of these long, deep-water inlets (for example, the Sognefjord) extend over a hundred miles into the interior. Fertile lands can be found in the southeast, in the lands near the waterways around the head of the Oslofjord and north from there on a line through Lake Mjøsa and the Osterdal and Gudbrandsdal valley systems to Trondheim. West of this fertile land is high plateau country reaching out



Map 2 Viking Age Scandinavia.